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ABSTRACT

A broad gap exists between research findings on reading and the application of these findings to the classroom. Commonly held beliefs of administrators and teachers that present formidable obstacles to the translation of research findings into action include: (1) many research designs are too complex and difficult to understand; (2) many research findings appear to be only minimally related to classroom practices; (3) most researchers are university personnel who seem to be functioning in a world that bears little resemblance to the classroom; (4) the sharing and discussion of the implications of research appear to be limited to doctoral committees and esoteric journals. Before research can be translated into classroom practice, there must be confidence in the product which is being transferred. The Research and Studies Committee of the New York State Reading Association published articles about some studies that they feel have made significant contributions to knowledge of the reading process. Since the primary purpose of the articles was to translate research into action, major emphasis was placed on the implications of the research. One or two paragraphs about the procedure of each study and a summary of the major findings were also included. Summaries of two key studies illustrate the format and substance of these articles. In addition to the efforts of the Research and Studies Committee, researchers, administrators, and teachers can begin to bridge the gap between research and practice by: (1) sharing ideas; (2) developing a process for sharing; (3) using clear language; (4) involving the principal in the process; and (5) including discussion of research in graduate reading courses. (PRA)

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TRANSLATING RESEARCH INTO ACTION

One has to be a confirmed optimist or a strong believer in the "vitality of hope" to tackle the topic of translating research on reading into action in the classroom. Or, at the very least, it helps to be a cynic with a sense of humor. We know there is a broad gap between research findings and the application of these findings to the classroom. It is customary for some researchers to speak of a 25 year time-lag between the publication of significant research and its use by the classroom teacher. Of course this 25 years could very well be 30 or 50 years. We just don't know. The figures are not based on carefully researched data. They are, at best, educated guesses. What we do know is that there is a lag, and a very significant one.

We also recognize that most administrators and teachers are not avid readers of the research and literature of the reading field. Most will admit that they have limited backgrounds in reading research and have little enthusiasm for the topic. They cite a variety of reasons for this attitude. These include: (1) many research designs are complex, difficult to understand, and not written for the classroom teacher; (2) many research findings appear to be minimally related to classroom practices; (3) most

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researchers are university personnel who seem to be functioning in a world of their own that bears little resemblance to the world of the classroom; (4) the sharing and discussion of the implications of reading research appear to be limited to doctoral committees and a few esoteric journals; and (5) teachers seem to have more faith in a technique or strategy that has "worked" over the years than in a research paper. These beliefs present formidable obstacles to the translation of research findings into action.

WHAT RESEARCH IS SIGNIFICANT?

If we are to translate research into classroom practice, we must have some confidence in the product that is being transferred. The writer is reminded of the statement by Henry David Thoreau, who, in the first chapter of Walden, commented, "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." How do we, as researchers and teachers, make sure that we have something worthwhile to communicate? One of the most recent and comprehensive studies to determine which reading research could be labeled as significant was conducted in 1984 by Dr. Daniel Pearce and associates at Eastern Montana College. Questionnaires were mailed to 300 professors of reading requesting them to list the ten studies they would include in a graduate class in reading research. Approximately 120 professors responded, and the following ten titles were most frequently cited in order of descending frequency:

1. Durkin, D. (1978-1979). What classroom observations reveal about reading comprehension instruction. Reading Research Quarterly, 4, 481-533.

2. Thorndike, E.L. (1917), Reading as reasoning:a study of mistakes in paragraph reading. Journal of Educational Psychology, 8, 323-332. (Reprinted in Reading Research Quarterly, 6, 425-434).

3. Bond, G.L. and Dykstra, D. (1967). The cooperative research program in first grade reading. Reading Research Quarterly, 2, 5-142.

4. Morphett, M.V. and Washburne, C. (1931). When should children begin to read. Elementary School Journal, 31, 496-503.

5. Chall, J.S. (1967). Learning to read : the great debate. New York: McGraw-Hill.

6. Clymer, T. (1963). The utility of phonic generalizations in the primary grades. The Reading Teacher, 16, 252-258.

7. Durkin, D. (1981). Reading comprehension instruction in five basal readers. Reading Research Quarterly, 16, 515-544.

8. Goodman, K.S. (1965). A linguistic study of cues and miscues in reading. Elementary English, 42, 631-643.

9. Davis, F.B. (1944). Fundamental factors of comprehension in reading. Psychometrika, 9, 185-197.

10. Durkin, D. (1966). Children who read early. New York: Teachers College Press.

Note that the dates of the above titles range from 1917 to 1981. Dolores Durkin's name appears three times in the top ten.

Another effort to list those studies that have made significant contributions to our knowledge of the reading process was prepared by the Research and Studies Committee (1984-1986) of the New York State Reading Association. The committee decided to select five studies for publication in successive issues of The Empire State Reading Scene, a newsletter of the New York State Reading Association. The summaries included "Procedures," "Major Findings of the Research," and "Implications for the Classroom Teacher." In addition to the studies listed as first, seventh, and eighth in the Pearce review, the committee believed that teachers should be familiar with the following two studies:

1. Ausubel, D.P. (1960). The use of advance organizers in the learning and retention of meaningful verbal material. Journal of Educational Psychology, 51, 267-272.

2. Perl, S.A. (1978). Five writers writing : case studies of the composing processes of unskilled college writers. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, New York University, New York.

SUMMARIES OF TWO KEY STUDIES

To illustrate the format and substance of the studies that appeared in the New York State Reading Association newsletter, two samples are presented for the reader. Since the primary purpose was to translate research into action, major emphasis was placed on "Implications." The summary of the Durkin study was prepared by the writer and the Goodman study by Dr. Arlene Shimanoff.

Durkin, D. (1978-1979). What classroom observations reveal about reading comprehension instruction. Reading Research Quarterly, 4, 481-533.

Procedure

According to Durkin, "The primary reason for the research was to learn through classroom observations of reading and social studies whether elementary schools provide comprehension instruction. Social studies was included on the assumption that comprehension instruction is required by the difficulty of social studies textbooks. Grades 3-6 were selected for the observations on the assumption that more comprehension instruction would be found there than in Grades 1 and 2."

Before starting classroom observations, Durkin reviewed the literature to provide guidelines for a definition of "comprehension instruction."

Efforts to locate a helpful definition were "fruitless." The definition finally selected was: "Teacher does/says something to help children understand or work out the meaning of more than a single isolated word." The definition was extended to include "extracting meaning from single sentences or pairs of sentences" or extracting meaning from "paragraphs (or more)."

Major findings of the research
(as summarized by Durkin in her article)

1. Practically no comprehension instruction was seen. Comprehension assessment, carried on for the most part through interrogation, was common. Whether children's answers were right or wrong was the big concern.
2. Other kinds of reading instruction were not seen with any frequency either. It cannot be said, therefore, that the teachers neglected comprehension because they were too busy teaching phonics, structural analysis, or word meanings.
3. In addition to being interrogators, teachers also turned out to be assignment-givers. As a result, time spent on giving, completing, and checking assignments consumed a large part of the observed periods. Sizeable amount of time also went to activities categorized as transition and non-instruction.
4. None of the observed teachers saw the social studies period as a time to improve children's comprehension abilities. Instead, all were concerned about covering content and with having children master facts.

Implications

1. If the participating schools in the Durkin study are representative of schools throughout the country (and the author cites evidence from existing studies and reports to show that they are), then concerted effort must be made to spend time on comprehension instruction. This

would include more time on readiness for the lesson, vocabulary and concept development, activities involving relationship of ideas and reasoning processes, study techniques, and questioning that goes beyond factual information.

2. Teachers must recognize that testing (or assignment giving) is not teaching. These activities do not clarify information or concepts for the average reader. Giving and checking assignments do not fall under the heading of "comprehension instruction." The role of the teacher in developing comprehension is an active one. Discussion must take place. Ideas must be exchanged. Children must be encouraged to react to statements and ask questions.

3. There is an increasing body of literature that says that comprehension can be taught directly. The National Institute of Education, in funding the Durkin study, accepted the assumption that comprehension can be taught. Pearson and Johnson (1972) state "that we can model comprehension processes for students, provide cues to help them understand what they are reading, guide discussions to help children know what they know, ask pointed, penetrating, or directional questions, offer feedback (both informational and reinforcing) at the appropriate time, and generate useful independent practice activities."

4. Programs to improve comprehension (or word recognition or study skills) require planning and reading leadership. Administrators must get involved in organizing, directing, and supporting reading programs.

5. Finally, if "practically no comprehension was seen," was it because teachers did not have the skills or the time, or because they see themselves primarily as managers, or record keepers? If so, priorities

must be clarified, and teaching must replace assignment giving and and checking as the No. 1 priority.

Goodman, K.S. (1965). A linguistic study of cues and miscues in reading. Elementary English, 42, 631-643.

In his 1965 report, "A Linguistic Study of Cues and Miscues in Reading," Goodman presented important conclusions emanating from his descriptive study of the oral reading of first, second, and third grade students. The study was based on the assumption that reading is an active process in which the reader's goal is to reconstruct the message intended by the author. For Goodman, "reading must involve some level of comprehension," and nothing short of that (e.g., word calling or sounding out words) can be considered reading. In this "psycholinguistic process"the reader uses the cue systems within language, many of which are so well internalized that the reader responds to them automatically, to interact with the written material.

Goodman grouped these systems into four general categories: (a) cues within words such as letter-sound relationships, shape or configuration, known little words in bigger words, known whole words, and recurrent spelling patterns; (b) cues in the flow of language including patterns of word order, inflection and inflectional agreement, function words such as noun markers, intonation, and referential meaning; (c) cues external to language and the reader such as pictures, objects, prompts from teachers to peers, and skill charts; and (d) cues within the reader including language facility, experiential and conceptual background, and reading and learning strategies.

Procedure. Participants in Goodman's study, the beginning of his miscue analysis research, were one hundred first, second, and third grade boys and girls attending an elementary school in an industrial suburb of Detroit. Students met individually with a research assistant and read orally a list of words based on grade-appropriate stories selected from a basal reading series not used in the school. If students missed too many or too few words on the list, they were given easier or more advanced word lists so that all subjects ended up with comparable lists on which they had missed an equal number of words.

Children then read orally, from the reader, the stories from which their individual word lists were taken. As they read, the research assistant recorded subjects' oral reading behaviors on worksheets. Finally, students retold their stories without referring back to the book. They were not told in advance that they would be required to do this.

Major findings of the research. Goodman predicted that because of the additional language cues in running discourse, children would be able to read many words in the context of the stories which they could not read from the lists where they had only limited cues within words to assist them. The results of the study confirmed his expectation. Except for a very small group of first graders and an even smaller group of second and third graders, all students could read correctly in the context of the stories at least half of the words that they missed on the lists. Results indicated additionally, that as children moved up in the grades they appeared increasingly able to use the syntactic and semantic cues provided in the text to aid them in word recognition. Although students in the upper grades also attempted to use word attack skills or "responses to cue systems within words" more frequently, they did not necessarily use these skills more efficiently.

Another aspect of the study dealt with regressions or repetitions in reading. Goodman found that "virtually every regression the children in this study made was for the purpose of correcting previous reading."

All of the oral reading errors made by the participants were categorized linguistically. Results indicated that the reading difficulties exhibited by these children were extremely diverse.

Implications.

1. As all children in the study were able to use the syntactic and semantic cues within stories to improve their ability to recognize words, these cues should be provided to readers during all phases of instruction. "Introducing new words out of context before new stories are introduced to children does not appear to be necessary or desirable."

2. If readers repeat words or phrases in attempts at self-correction, then the regressions themselves become means of learning. Instead of viewing regressions as errors, teachers should recognize the positive role they play, especially for beginning readers.

3. Rather than prompt or correct students during oral reading, teachers should help readers build correction strategies of their own so that they may learn to recognize errors or "miscues" that result in loss of meaning.

4. Reading instruction must be tailored to meet individual needs. In view of the extreme diversity of reading difficulties exhibited by the children in the study, the "shotgun teaching of so-called phonic skills to whole classes or groups at the same time seems highly questionable."

5. Since it was more difficult for the children in the study to read words in isolation than to read them in stories, reading theories and methodologies should stress the acquisition of meaning in natural language contexts; language rather than words must be emphasized.

6. The experience story provides a useful vehicle for the teaching of these strategies. In these stories readers are able to draw upon their natural language competencies and their experiential backgrounds to make sense of the print on the page. Strategies for getting to meaning, including word recognition strategies, can then be taught using language which is natural and relevant to the learner, language in which the integrated use of the various cues available help make the meaning clearer to the reader.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

1. The key word is "sharing." Ideas must be exchanged between researchers in the field and classroom practitioners. Findings should be evaluated, decisions made as to what is pertinent and transferable, and a willingness demonstrated to try new strategies in the classroom.

2. Another key word is "process." The desire to share is not enough. There must be specific procedures or a process developed for sharing. This article referred to the use of a statewide newsletter, The Empire State Reading Scene. Each issue contained the column, "Research That Has Made a Difference." However, sharing can be done in a variety of proven ways: grade-level and school meetings, seminars and conferences, demonstrations, use of guest speakers, distribution of key articles

from journals, etc. But just as we caution our students to read critically, teachers must develop the same critical attitudes when it comes to research findings. In most cases, there is more than one correct answer, plus implications yet to be dreamed of.

3. The sharing process involves communication. This bring us to the question of language. Highet (1950) refers to the importance of clarity. "Whatever you are teaching, make it clear. Make it as firm as stone and as bright as sunlight. Not to yourself - that is easy. Make it clear to the people you are teaching - that is difficult. The difficulty lies partly in subject-matter and partly in language." Teachers in the main are more interested in application of the findings of the study to their own classrooms, rather than in coefficients of correlations, t or F tests, or other sophisticated established procedures. Barzun (1987) dwells on our tendency to favor the esoteric or unusual over plain language when he states, "Few things are more characteristic of the modern mind than to take complication for improvement." In short, make it clear. Use language that makes sense to the listener.

4. The principal must take a leading role in the process. In discussing the factors responsible for the success of reading programs, Rauch, (1983) listed the first as leadership. "Every successful program observed had a guiding force behind it; in the majority of cases, a concerned and knowledgeable principal. In other situations, a reading supervisor or director (with the full and open support of the administration) took charge. But in all successful programs there was clear evidence of leadership, direction and support."

5. Basic graduate reading courses must include time for discussion of research reports and possible classroom applications. Current surveys of the content of such courses show that this is not being done.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Whenever the writer is involved in the teaching-learning process, he tries to acknowledge his debt to former instructors; in this case, Gilbert Highet of Columbia University. Highet (1950) referred to three key words to make teaching more effective: clarity, patience, and responsibility. Here are some of his thoughts about patience: "Anything worth teaching takes time to learn, and time to teach. ... Real teaching is not simply handing out packages of information. It culminates in a conversion, an actual change of the pupil's mind. An important change takes a long time to carry through, and should therefore be planned carefully and approached in slow stages with plenty of repetition disguised by variation." These thoughts should help guide us as we bridge the gap between research and classroom practice.

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